

CO-CREATION:

The Public Sector Perspective

by Patricia Bowie



CASE STUDY OF THE

Connecticut Early Childhood Funder Collaborative

A project of the Connecticut Council for Philanthropy



This paper is the *third in a series* exploring the public-private partnership undertaken by the Connecticut Early Childhood Funder Collaborative, the Connecticut Council for Philanthropy, and the State of Connecticut.

This final paper, *Co-Creation: The Public Sector Perspective*, brings forward the perspective of those working within the public sector—specifically in the State of Connecticut—in forging new working relationships with the philanthropic community. The first article, *Co-Creation: Viewing Partnerships Through a New Lens*, provided a look at public-private partnerships through the lens of co-creation to more effectively assess and sustain efforts to improve outcomes for children in partnership with the State of Connecticut (Bowie, 2016). The second article, *Taking on New Roles to Address 21st Century Problems*, explored the role of the Connecticut Council for Philanthropy (CCP), an association of funders within this endeavor (Bowie, 2016). For CCP, this was an opportunity to explore and test a new working structure in response to the desire within Connecticut's philanthropic community to achieve meaningful and large-scale systems change.

ABSTRACT

This article continues to explore the partnership between the State of Connecticut, the Connecticut Early Childhood Funder Collaborative, and the Connecticut Council for Philanthropy. These three entities have been working to coordinate their efforts toward a shared goal of establishing a statewide early childhood system, reducing the fragmented array of Connecticut's existing early childhood services and supports, and improving outcomes for young children and their families across the State.

Independently and collectively, each partner continues to adopt new processes and working structures that enable the voluntary contribution of their diverse skills, expertise, and resources to create a new approach to early childhood in Connecticut. While clearly not the only constituencies working to improve outcomes for children and families throughout the state, this partnership between the public sector and the philanthropic community has resulted in important transformations within all entities involved. This paper highlights the role of the public sector within this public-private partnership, and, more specifically, the experience and perspectives of those working within state government.

“We knew we needed to not only work with others, but the work had to be done differently. We decided that starts with us.”

Liz Donohue, Senior Advisor, Deputy Chief of Staff, Office of Governor Dannel P. Malloy, State of Connecticut

A NEW ADMINISTRATION

Governor Malloy came into office in 2011. Problems such as poverty, economic disparities, family instability, low student achievement, violence, homelessness, and widening disparities in health and mental health outcomes persisted despite the many efforts of previous administrations. The Malloy administration fully understood that government alone was not going to solve these deeply entrenched problems. Therefore, the Governor’s Office committed to engaging and working with others to respond to problems in new ways—*without having a preconceived idea of what those new ways should be.*

One of these new approaches was the Governor’s invitation to the philanthropic community embodied in legislation adopted early in 2011, mandating improved coordination among all state-level public agencies touching the lives of young children. For the two years allocated to design this new approach, the legislation invited the philanthropic community to partner with state government. This provided a long-awaited opportunity for both philanthropy and the Office of the Governor to collectively address their shared goal of improving the well-being of Connecticut’s young children.

The Governor and his staff did not knowingly invite the Early Childhood Funder Collaborative or the Connecticut Council for Philanthropy to engage in a long-term co-creation process. Yet the working relationship fostered with the philanthropic community did employ the essential elements with which co-creation endeavors flourish (Bowie, 2016). For the public sector, the most pronounced change that emerged from the 2011 legislation was the establishment, three years later, of an Office of Early Childhood.

Because of the public sector’s teaming with philanthropy, child and family advocates, community members, and legislators who pushed for the statute, Connecticut remains one of only four states with a State-administered early childhood agency, an office that has equal footing with other state agencies and reports directly to the Governor.

Connecticut is also recognized as having gone the furthest in terms of streamlining services for children and families (Kovner, 2015). The Office of Early Childhood consolidates nine different programs that had been scattered across five departments, each with a separate mission and a primary focus that did not include improving early childhood outcomes. This represents close to a \$330 million investment in young children that is taking a comprehensive approach to and identifying a clear point of accountability for improving those outcomes.

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF CO-CREATION

- 1 A diverse community of individuals from within state government and the philanthropic community took advantage of each other's expertise and local knowledge to adapt their efforts to ever-changing conditions (Gloor, 2005).
- 2 Group norms and rules of engagement provided enough structure for the funder group to build a shared sense of trustworthiness and manage the partnership toward a diffuse reciprocity—the willingness to give without demanding a precise accounting of equivalent return or benefit for each action (Kramer, 2014; Ostrom, 2010).
- 3 An integrative structure created by the Connecticut Council for Philanthropy enabled group members to connect and work in new ways. This structure supported everyone in participating and contributing as they could, managed the simple rules of engagement, provided opportunities for multiple interactions for reflection and learning, and influenced a “norming” of new behaviors. It is integrative structures like this one that are critical in dealing with the complexity of a polycentric system (Aligica, 2014; Ostrom, 1990).
- 4 Individuals gained valuable professional experiences and learning from the differing perspectives and expertise of their colleagues. The group was able to avoid getting trapped in the kind of collaborative process that insists on full agreement before taking action. This allowed for a divergence of ideas and interests to surface and multiple actions to move forward simultaneously (Morieux & Tollman, 2014).
- 5 The effort generated value by creating a ‘win’ for all parties. By reflecting on group process, attending to conflicts, and adapting the structure and work to address the needs of the respective parties, everyone contributed to the first big win, the launch of the state Office of Early Childhood. By attending to its process as well as to the desired outcomes, the partnership continues to learn its way forward (Zolli & Healey, 2012).

The legislation authorizing the Office of Early Childhood passed in 2014, and the Office is one example of the Malloy administration's view of how government should function. For the administration, it is a demonstration of government's ability to acknowledge the huge changes needed to meaningfully

address some of the most intractable problems in society, open itself up to new ways of working, and invite others whose interests converge with its own to engage in co-creating the transformation needed for a better future.

“We had to go beyond collective agreements and begin to understand what we each could and could not do based on the organizational structures, roles, and rules within which we worked.”

Carlotta Schechter, member, State of Connecticut Early Childhood Planning Team

EMPLOYING CO-CREATION

When considering policy or other changes in government, a typical approach is to focus on what is familiar and known, and to follow some basic steps. Identify the problem. Introduce a change. Get the necessary acceptance or approval to adopt the change. Adapt it to fit the particular state or local context, and continue to work to expand the solution and ensure that it functions at scale.

When policy or program interventions have proven outcomes, known solutions exist. When solutions are known, this typical approach can work. Integrating new policy solutions becomes simply a matter of working on what we know with those we know.

At other times, however, a problem may be widely acknowledged, but no clear solutions present themselves. There is no quick fix, and incremental change is not the answer. Any true solution will be complex and in need of a broad, comprehensive response. In this scenario, attaining better policy solutions requires venturing into a deeper understanding of the underlying causes of the problem and exploring what the change could be—rather than reacting too quickly and responding only to the presenting problem.

For example, the state team, the Early Childhood Funder Collaborative, early childhood advocates, and others initially considered taking the policy approach of providing preschool for all. With further consideration and an exploration of the full range of challenges and opportunities inherent in improving outcomes for young children, however, it became clear that although preschool attendance was part

of the solution, it alone would not fully eliminate disparities in early childhood outcomes. “Preschool for all” would also not have brought together the fragmented array of Connecticut’s existing early childhood services and supports.

A co-creation process can support this type of solution seeking. Participants share a cross-section of ideas and perspectives, taking time to allow this new information to marinate and evolve before jumping to a solution or response. Tapping into a group’s diversity of experience and knowledge is critical, but it is also necessary to find new ways of working—both within one’s defined role and when teaming with other sectors to pursue long-term goals.

At the same time, an initial working group cannot just leap from an early phase of exploring the problem to a final-stage result without bringing others along. Within any process, key decision points and actions must move things forward and develop a process. Many times, this includes taking actions that are task-specific or follow more traditional methods. In fact, the process for designing the Office for the Early Childhood was just that.

TRADITIONAL APPROACH

Key stakeholders are appointed. Group is sanctioned with decision-making authority. This group sets goals, plan and strategic direction before any actions are taken.

Rules, roles and tasks are specified through a formal mechanism (such as bylaws or memorandum of agreements). Emphasis is on outlining authority and accountability of each entity before actions are taken.

Oversight is provided by an identified lead organization, Government Agency or Department. Once goals, plan and actions are set, accountability is based on delivering on the set actions.

Identifying the right program model or intervention is key. Need assurance that there is an evidenced-based model or approach to achieve the result before moving forward. Fidelity to the evidence-based model, approach, or intervention is key. Expanding the program or approach is the approach to going to scale.

Value is based on achieving results. Lead agency monitors results based on key indicators determined by leadership body. Openness and transparency in sharing progress and results are restricted to a select few.

USING CO-CREATION

Group of diverse stakeholders self organize around shared goal. Common goal but open to uncertainty. There can be more than one plan or theory on how to move the work forward.

Work adheres to common principles or rules of engagement. Roles and functions distributed across players, organizations and sectors. Can move forward without formal agreements or consensus.

Integrative platform or structure (physical or virtual) is used to share knowledge, monitor and support group to adhere to rules of engagement and adapt actions in order to align efforts across the different actors and levels of the system.

Willingness to learn and experiment with new ideas and adopt new roles and structures. Recognition of no “right” way. Solutions will be context specific. Critical to engage those responsible for implementing policy or actions as well as those meant to directly benefit from the intervention. The key is to respond to local conditions and adapt efforts for successful spread and scale.

Value remains individually and organizationally defined. The group is relentlessly reflective. Collectively producing and sharing knowledge on the collective process, action taken, and the results to bring value to all stakeholders.

The Early Childhood Planning Team took the following approach to designing and launching the new Office of Early Childhood:

- 1 Identified the problem (the legislation spelled out the challenge)
 - 2 Spoke with statewide stakeholder groups—advocates, preschool providers, philanthropy—to obtain their understanding of the problem
 - 3 Spoke with constituents from local communities to understand their experience of the problem
 - 4 Gathered outside expertise and good examples of the various ways other states were attempting to tackle the problem (the problem was not unique to Connecticut)
 - 5 Designed different potential solutions
 - 6 Went to state government stakeholders to ascertain if any of these potential solutions were feasible, or were more or less desirable
 - 7 Established what it would take for the State to achieve any of the three options
 - 8 Proposed all three to the Governor
 - 9 Set out to make his choice a reality
-

THE PUBLIC SECTOR EXPERIENCE

Launching the Office of Early Childhood was a critical step in initiating change. Yet it was only the beginning of a much longer co-creation process dedicated to improving outcomes for young children. To truly co-create innovations across sectors and disciplines requires a grasp of the boundaries within which professional roles and organizations function, plus a level of trust that everyone involved is working to understand how best to move, create change, and improve within their respective domains. Individuals must be able to continue to function within their existing contexts.

The State team had a singular goal: to create an early childhood system. While multiple groups may have been working in concert toward that same goal, they were not focusing on a co-creation process per se, or even on forming partnerships. Rather, each was simply responding to a specific need.

The public sector is of necessity solution driven. At the same time, it must avoid narrowing its focus so much that a 'quick fix' replaces a more thorough and effective problem-solving approach. If the work does not engage those in the public sector responsible for

implementing policy solutions or for reaching out to the clients they are meant to help, it can be doomed to failure. The invitation to engage has to come early, in the formative stages of exploring the problem.

Connecticut's work with the philanthropic community took time to establish a structure that enabled funders and state players to approach the process as a team. The Early Childhood Funder Collaborative and the State planning team sorted out their respective roles and began to establish trust in their collective effort. Early Childhood Funder Collaborative members

made introductions for the State's Early Childhood Team where needed, supported the State team as experts in early childhood policy, and encouraged their respective professional networks and others to have confidence in the process. This, along with backing from the larger early childhood community and others throughout the state, assisted the State team in their efforts to craft an innovative approach to early childhood in Connecticut.

With near unanimous bipartisan support, the legislation to create the new state Office of Early Childhood was seen as an easy win . . . and therefore a perfect repository for amendments of all kinds tailored to legislators' specific constituencies, no matter how unrelated they were to the issue of early childhood. The bill became so entangled in these extraneous issues that it was never called to the floor for a vote.

The partnership was forced to regroup. Given the political back and forth, was its proposed plan to build a statewide system for early childhood compelling enough to move forward at this time? The legislature, while calling for systemic statewide changes in early childhood programs and services, was also concerned about taking undue risks with public resources. Legislators sought fiscal efficiency and reliability in the administration's performance. Any change had to result in a demonstrated improvement, or at least have a reasonable chance of doing so.

Although the political wrangling was not directly tied to the legislation contained in the bill, the Early Childhood Funder Collaborative did begin to question whether or not sufficient backing existed for the issue from the Governor's Office. By moving to initially launch the Office of Early Childhood through

executive order in 2013, the Governor assured the philanthropic community of his support for the public-private partnership, as well as his commitment to the broader domain of early childhood.

Reinvigorated, the partnership took a more strategic localized approach to engaging their respective contacts within the legislature. With a clear and specific task at hand, the group—along with other advocates and the larger early childhood community—could move forward. Individuals understood each other better and recognized they needed one another to address the collective goal and work effectively as a team. The delay gave everyone the time to share more broadly about their exploration of the issue, their knowledge and expertise on why it mattered, and what Connecticut could do to improve the lives of its youngest children. A year later, the legislature voted to establish the Office of Early Childhood as a state department, and confirmed its first commissioner.

Change within government is slow by design, and legislative change requires following rules and procedures. In a perfect scenario, you see a problem, develop a legislative response, get public input, follow the process steps precisely, do everything correctly, and the bill passes into law. But it's still possible to do all the right things and still not get the result you want.

While this can be frustrating for those within the public sector, it can be perplexing for those partners who don't work within it, who often expect public sector partners to have the same authority to act on group agreements—and move them forward in a timely fashion—as they do. Within the public sector, though, most agencies or departments do not have the authority to plan and act unilaterally. In most cases, decisions are restricted by higher levels of government, such as federal mandates or funding restrictions. When attempting systems change, groups must recognize the strengths and weaknesses of government.

THE PUBLIC SECTOR ROLE

Getting a written law or policy put into place is an exciting accomplishment, and launching the Office was certainly that. It was still, though, only one step toward ensuring better outcomes for children. The State team's new mandate was to address the fragmented system of early childhood that had evolved over time, integrating the federal and state resources available for children and children's programs and making them more efficient.

While the Funder Collaborative certainly agreed that integration and efficiency was important, they were also interested in moving beyond simply improving existing programs. For the most part, funding and programs for children are restricted to serving children with specific risks or developmental needs, or those living in poverty. Issue- or need-specific funding leads to a fragmented approach to serving children and no ability to fully take into account family circumstances nor the critical role families play in addressing children's needs.

Some early childhood funders had been investing in innovation to introduce a more holistic family and community approach to improving early childhood outcomes. While working at a much smaller scale and with much less money than was managed by the State, the Funder Collaborative was aiming for a broad change. Its goal was to ensure that the underlying causes of poor child outcomes were addressed and that a new early childhood system would lead to meaningful change.

In periods of innovation, change, or uncertainty, the business community refers to this type of management challenge as the strategy paradox—the need to

commit to a particular strategy despite a deep uncertainty about which path will result in a successful transition from fulfilling existing commitments into creating a new future with better results. The answer to the paradox lies in separating the management of these two elements. Some assume the responsibility of delivering on commitments the organization has already made—as the State did in this instance—while others provide exposure to, and build the capacity to adapt to, more promising opportunities (Raynor, 2007).

While the strategy paradox is primarily discussed as a management solution for a single business or institution, it also provides the public sector and philanthropy a way to succinctly capture the inherent challenge in moving an effort forward and taking more strategic advantage of their respective roles and strengths.

Establishing the Office of Early Childhood involved moving a multitude of programs and aligning and integrating differing administrative processes. Over 130 staff experienced changes in staff functions, reporting structures, and work teams. The public sector has very specific rules and procedures as to how this type of administrative change is managed, including who can participate in planning and decision-making. These are and remain public-sector-specific functions. From the State's perspective, it is not only its staff's role to deliver on existing commitments to serve children, it is their primary purpose (although managing an internal transformation can

leave little time for anything else). Their intention and focus turned to doing things differently, with fresh perspective, transparency, and openness. For government, this is innovation—the innovation so many outside of government demand.

On the philanthropy side (as mentioned in **Co-Creation: Viewing Partnerships Through a New Lens**), the Early Childhood Funder Collaborative invested resources to test new ideas and build the capacity to leverage new opportunities to improve early childhood outcomes.

While the ability to take investment risks differed by funder, the Early Childhood Funder Collaborative has collectively helped mitigate any shortfall in achieving the overall objective—not simply ensuring the success of the Office of Early Childhood itself, but rather fulfilling a collective responsibility for improving overall outcomes for young children.

First, the Early Childhood Funder Collaborative provided funding for an organizational assessment, which enabled the newly established Office of Early Childhood to explore ideas for a revised management structure, ways to improve efficiency, and integrative approaches for early childhood programs and services. This has served the Office for Early Childhood Office well. By charting a new vision and strategic direction, the Office has succeeded in obtaining new federal funding and other nationally available resources.

It has likewise broadened efforts to align and integrate resources for children with other State departments that address the economic and health needs of low-income families (this is commonly referred to as the ‘two-generation’ approach).

Second, the public-private partnership created a new precedent for bringing voices with a diversity of knowledge and experiences into the process of co-creation. The public sector is always challenged to improve the participatory processes that engage those most directly affected by its decisions. Via their work throughout Connecticut, members of the Funder Collaborative gained direct knowledge of the effects policies and practices had on their intended beneficiaries. The creation of the Early Childhood Funder Collaborative allowed for a more expansive and diverse group of funders to directly participate, diffusing the risk of its perspective and contributions being dominated by a few. The State team’s confidence grew as the funders were bringing forward a more representative view of family and community needs, and that they were capable of offering a fuller perspective on the diverse interests of the local communities.

Many funders could also offer a more complete picture of the complex weave of resources—both public and private—that exist in communities. While funders do not replace the State’s need to have families, communities, providers, and advocates directly voice their own concerns and experience, they are able to connect the State team to more diverse local networks. They can extend the reach of State workers to ensure that the voices of those most directly affected by decisions and policies are heard.

“We realized pretty quickly we could be transparent but still remain tone-deaf. We need to be open to influence and change.”

Myra Jones-Taylor, Commissioner, State Office of Early Childhood; Member, State of Connecticut Early Childhood Planning Team

THE PUBLIC BENEFIT

It is easy enough to agree on a shared goal of improving the lives of children. In Connecticut, the partnership between the State, the Early Childhood Funder Collaborative, and the Connecticut Council for Philanthropy has found co-creation to be a powerful framework for introducing the innovation needed to actually reach that goal.

The strength and promise of co-creation is the voluntary contributions of diverse sectors and disciplines to crafting solutions not known in advance. On the other hand, self-organizing and self-governing processes are fragile enterprises. Individuals and entities are not asked to give up their autonomy, and no clear lines of authority or accountability exist. The added value of working this way has to be made explicit, so participants feel it is worth the effort and cost to maintain it.

As explored in *Taking on New Roles to Address 21st Century Problems*, it was the Connecticut Council for Philanthropy (CCP) that played the integrative role of allowing the group to establish and manage its collective agreements. Unlike traditional organizations or administrative support structures, the CCP remained flexible and responsive to the emergent needs of the partnership. Changes in such a group's membership and participation are inevitable, and within the public sector essentially a given. The CCP's integrative role therefore included reminding the group to orient new partners to the group's expectations, culture, and norms, as well as assisting the group to effectively manage the exit of individuals and organizations.

Launching the Office of Early Childhood was clearly a great political achievement and it is certainly part of Governor Malloy's legacy. The more difficult question is whether or not this systems-change effort has created the mechanisms and conditions necessary to fully realize improved outcomes for children and families.

Though that question is still open, the administration has established a new way for the public sector to engage with the philanthropic community, and those methods have spread to other stakeholders as well. The Office of Early Childhood has continued to reshape the way in which constituents are engaged in its work. In a tough economic environment, with the State undergoing major cuts in services and programs, the Office of Early Childhood asks others to partner with it, to contribute their knowledge and skills, to share the local context and conditions of families with children, to offer insight about the needs of provider community, and to assist in making difficult choices with limited resources.

In addition, the Office of Early Childhood extended an invitation to the early childhood community, child-care providers, and families—as well as philanthropy—to contribute to both the new plan for federal Childcare Development Block Grants and the Office's recently approved five-year strategic plan. Its approach went much further than sharing a preordained plan in a perfunctory attempt at transparency, simply describing what decisions were made and why. The State took in all feedback and opened itself to new ideas, and its plan for going forward changed.

While the Office of Early Childhood continues to grapple with the capacity to meet its own (and others') expectations about communication and engagement, it continuously reaches into the community to more fully engage the diverse voices of those most affected by the policies and decisions it makes.

The Office anticipates that its being open to influence and change can establish a new culture to sustain the cooperative actions and relationships necessary to improve outcomes for children and families.

There is a different pace to this work. It requires setting new expectations and norms for how work should get done and what constitutes success. These new norms include pre-discussions to allow collaborators' thoughts and ideas to surface, finding different ways to put collaborative efforts into practice, and continuously gathering feedback on the results. By embracing the value of co-creation, the public sector can offer new ways to address the complexities of 'community' in the 21st century.

The Office of Early Childhood is committed not only to doing its part to improve the lives of children in Connecticut, but also to building the public's expectations (and demands) for a new public sector approach to partnership and change that gets to better results.

REFERENCES

- Aligica, Paul Dragos** (2014). *Institutional Diversity and Political Economy: The Ostroms and Beyond*. Oxford University Press.
- Bowie, Patricia** (2016). "Co-Creation: Viewing Partnerships Through a New Lens"
<https://www.ctphilanthropy.org/resources/co-creation-viewing-partnerships-through-new-lens>
- Bowie, Patricia** (2016). "Taking on New Roles to Address 21st Century Problems"
<https://www.ctphilanthropy.org/resources/co-creation-viewing-partnerships-through-new-lens>
- Gloor, Peter A.** (2005). *Swarm Creativity: Competitive Advantage through Collaborative Innovation Network*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Kovner, Josh.** "State Consolidates, Elevates Early Childhood Services." *Hartford Courant*, March 2, 2015.
<http://www.courant.com/politics/hc-early-childhood-0302-20150302-story.html>
- Kramer, Larry** (2014). "Collaboration and Diffuse Reciprocity: a new attitude toward collaboration could help funders achieve greater long-term gains." *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.
http://ssir.org/articles/entry/collaboration_and_diffuse_reciprocity
- Ostrom, Elinor** (1990). *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Ostrom, Elinor** (2010). "Beyond markets and states: polycentric governance of complex economic systems." *American Economic Review*, 100, 1–33.
- Raynor, Michael** (2007). *The Strategy Paradox: Why Committing to Success Leads to Failure (And What to do About It)*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Zolli, Andrew and Anne Marie Healey** (2012). *Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, Inc.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patricia Bowie has been working with organizations, community-based initiatives, and community groups to develop new ways to improve their work while sustaining their viability and commitment to their missions. Her commitment to the continuous study of contemporary research allows her to provide a unique opportunity for organizational learning and guidance on using proven theories to improve organizational practice, to improve systems, and to work toward population-level outcomes. Currently affiliated with UCLA's Center for Healthier Children, Families, and Communities, Ms. Bowie holds a Masters in Public Health from UCLA and a B.A. in Political Science from the University of Vermont.

The author would like to acknowledge the financial support of the CT Early Childhood Funder Collaborative, a project of the Connecticut Council for Philanthropy, in producing this document. She would also like to thank Carol O'Donnell, Early Childhood Funder Collaborative Executive Director, for reviewing several versions of this paper and Liz Donohue, Myra Jones-Taylor, and Carlotta Schechter for providing critical insight into the State team's perspective and the public sector role.



The **Connecticut Council for Philanthropy** is an association of grantmakers committed to promoting and supporting effective philanthropy for the public good.



CONTACT US

221 Main Street, Hartford, CT 06106

tel (860) 525 5585 / (800) 437 1190

fax (860) 525 0436

email ccp@CTphilanthropy.org

FIND US ONLINE

website CTphilanthropy.org

facebook [CTphilanthropy](https://www.facebook.com/CTphilanthropy)

twitter [@CTphilanthropy](https://twitter.com/CTphilanthropy)

linkedin [Connecticut Council for Philanthropy](https://www.linkedin.com/company/Connecticut-Council-for-Philanthropy)